



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

1930 Ninth Avenue
Helena, MT 59601
406.4HEALTH or 406.443.2584
Fax: 406.457.8990

Managing Stress: a Major Component of Healthy Lifestyle

**By Melanie Reynolds
County Health Officer**

I sometimes like to describe good health as a four-legged stool. Each leg represents something vital to support our physical and mental well-being: physical activity, good nutrition, adequate sleep, and well-managed stress.

Surveys consistently show that most Americans have wobbly stools when it comes to that last leg. According to the American Psychological Association, 3 out of 4 adults last year had ongoing physical or psychological symptoms caused by stress.

Life in Montana may be a bit less nerve-racking. In a 2009 Gallup poll, we ranked ninth among least-stressed states (North Dakota ranked first). Still, close to 38 percent of us said we had experienced stress during much of the previous day.

Ours is an overstressed nation.

Good Stress, Bad Stress

All of us feel stress at one time or another. It's an automatic and natural response that helped our ancestors to defend themselves in the face of predators and other physical dangers. Today it can motivate us to perform well when we have deadlines to meet, presentations to give, or family gatherings to host. It can help us to cope with the changes and challenges we face every day.

When we feel threatened – physically or otherwise – our body kicks into high gear. Our brain floods our bloodstream with hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. These boost our heart rate and blood-sugar level, giving us the energy we need to react to emergencies. Cortisol also curbs functions that you don't need in a crisis, like the immune, digestive, and reproductive systems.

Once the threat passes, hormone levels are supposed to return to normal. But when you constantly feel under attack, the fight-or-flight response gets stuck in the "on" position. Your body is continually exposed to stress hormones.

This overexposure can disrupt almost every process in your body, increasing your risk of having serious health problems. Stress has been linked to heart disease, cancer, lung disease, high blood

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pressure, diabetes, depression, anxiety disorder, and other illnesses. Stress can even take a toll on your oral health by causing you to clench or grind your teeth.

Not only does stress cause physical changes in the body. It also prompts many of us to adopt bad habits – like smoking or binge eating or drinking – to try to cope. These can make existing problems worse.

That's why it's so important to learn healthy ways of coping with stress in your life.

Managing Stress

The first step to managing stress is to learn to recognize your body's response to it. Not everyone reacts the same. Signs can include anxiety, fatigue, anger, headaches and backaches, upset stomach, sleep problems, and memory and concentration problems.

The next step is to choose a healthy way to deal with your stress. In some cases, you may be able to avoid stress, but this often isn't possible. It may be more practical to change the way you react to it.

Experts have these suggestions:

- **Build strong relationships** with people who can provide emotional and other support. Reach out to them when you're having a tough time.
- **Don't worry about things you can't control**, like the weather or someone else's behavior.
- **Avoid dwelling on problems.** This one is particularly challenging for me.
- **Set realistic goals** at work and home. Avoid overscheduling yourself.
- **Set priorities.** Decide what must get done and what can wait, and learn to say no to new tasks if they'll overwhelm you. Eliminate tasks that aren't essential.
- **Solve the little problems.** It can help give you a sense of control.
- **Make time for enjoyable and relaxing activities** in your life each day. Participate in something you don't find stressful, like hobbies or social events. Get a massage or take a warm bath.
- **Eat regular, well-balanced meals and get enough sleep.**
- **Exercise regularly.** It helps to relieve pent-up tension and release mood-improving chemicals in your brain.
- **Meditate.** Research shows that activities like yoga and relaxation exercises not only help reduce stress, but they also boost immune functioning.
- **Do some deep breathing.** This helps you get plenty of oxygen and activates the relaxation response, the body's antidote to stress. (see sidebar)

If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, talk to your health-care provider or a mental health professional. He or she can help you learn to manage stress effectively.

Remember, reducing stress in your life won't just make you feel better in the short term. It may protect your health and quality of life in the long term, too.

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Sidebar

Steps to Deep Breathing

From the American Academy of Family Physicians

1. Lie on a flat surface.
2. Place a hand on your stomach, just above your navel. Place your other hand on your chest.
3. Breathe in slowly and try to make your stomach rise a little.
4. Hold your breath for a second.
5. Breathe out slowly and let your stomach go back down.

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